

**Statement of Kirk Koepsel, Northern Plains Regional Representative
Sierra Club and Wyoming Chapter Member**

**Regarding H.R. 4103, a bill directing the Bureau of Land Management to sell
1,642 acres of federal land southwest of Casper, Wyoming, to the Church of
Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.**

**Submitted to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands
May 16, 2002**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I would like to establish by my testimony our opposition to House Resolution 4103, the sale of historically important public lands to a private entity.

I am Kirk Koepsel, Northern Plains Senior Regional Representative for the Sierra Club. I am speaking today on behalf of the Wyoming Chapter of the Sierra Club. I have been a Chapter member for twelve years. The Wyoming Chapter represents over 1,000 Wyoming citizens and over 700,000 members nationwide who recreate, explore and enjoy our public lands.

The Martin Cove Sale Is Contrary to the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976

Section 102 (a) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) clearly states: Congress declares that it is the policy of the United States that (1) the public lands be retained in Federal ownership, unless as a result of the land use planning procedure provided for in this Act, it is determined that disposal of a particular parcel will serve the national interest.

Section 203 (a) makes it even more clear that this sale is contrary to the national interest where it prohibits the BLM from selling lands along units of the National System of Trails.

Historical Value

Martin's Cove is located along four National Historical Trails -- the Oregon Trail, Mormon Trail, California Trail, and the Pony Express Trail. In fact, the region surrounding these four trails near Martin's Cove is one of the best areas to view the intact trails and experience the history of western expansion. The four trails and their tracks have been severely diminished in other parts of the West by highway paving, development and agricultural cultivation, thus it is important to preserve the Martin's Cove area.

500,000 people traveled these Historic Trails before 1900. Eighty-five per cent of these users were not Mormons headed for Utah. The Oregon Trail is the first road carved by covered wagon travelers and later followed by the 49'ers, Mormon pioneers and Pony Express riders. The Mormon Trail is recognized as the first National Historic Trail in the nation. The Native American prehistoric use of the Martin's Cove vicinity should be recognized as well.

Quite frankly, with the prohibition on selling lands along National Trails in FLMPA, the Sierra Club was surprised by the endorsement of an amended HR 4103 by the Department of Interior at the Casper field hearing. This is a major shift in policy. The Wyoming BLM told the church that they would not sell Martin's Cove in accordance with their Resource Management Plan, and it makes little sense that the Department of Interior would blatantly disregard Federal Law, and local management decisions.

Martin's Cove Sale is Contrary to the Intent of the National Register of Historic Places

There has not been any BLM-administered National Register of Historic Places sold to a private entity. If the BLM were forced to transfer title of Martin's Cove, let alone an entire 2.5 sections of our public land, it would be selling off the National Register site at Martin's Cove and part of the Tom Sun Ranch National Historic Landmark.

Martin's Cove Sale Would Include Lands Proposed for Wilderness Designation

Martin's Cove is located within recommended boundaries for the Sweetwater Rocks wilderness area proposed by sixteen Wyoming conservation and sporting organizations. It is an area of exceptional beauty and scenery. This area is composed of an ancient mountain range whose smooth pink granite is a backdrop for the Sweetwater River and to the four National Historic Trails, which pass close by.

Martin's Cove Would Set a Dangerous Precedent for Other Religiously Significant Lands

This is probably the most significant and detrimental public land sale in Wyoming and the Nation in recent memory. The precedent will be established to dispose of nationally significant public lands to special interest groups. Never before has a National Historic Site or National Historic Trail been sold to any special interest group. In fact, a front page story in the Saturday, May 11, 2002 Casper Star Tribune discusses how Native Americans are paying close attention to this bill, because of their desire to acquire sacred sites. Devil's Tower National Monument in Wyoming and Rainbow Bridge National Monument are examples of Native American sacred sites that have had difficulty coordinating sacred use with the general public's

enjoyment. Other religious institutions may also be interested in the purchasing of public lands. For example, much of the red rock canyon country around Sedona, Arizona is considered sacred to believers in New Age religion.

Conclusion

The Martin's Cove area is currently managed under a cooperative management agreement between the Bureau of Land Management and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. I have toured and hiked Martin's Cove area as well as the Sweetwater Rocks Wilderness Study Areas. The Church does a great job on interpretation of the site at the Sun Ranch. Visitors can go to Martin's Cove via a hiking trail, and can even pull a handcart if they choose. The short hike to Martin's Cove is beautiful and inspirational the way it is currently managed. The current management more than satisfies the vast majority of visitors who go to the site. The Wyoming Chapter of the Sierra Club believes that there is no need to change the management at Martin's Cove. There are many reasons that we have pointed out that the sale of this land is not in the public's best interest.

We also feel that Representative Hansen should accede to the position of Wyoming's U.S. Representative, Barbara Cubin who does not support this legislation. We would hope that Representative Cubin's opposition would warrant the withdrawal of H.R. 4103 from the legislative process. Martin's Cove is best left in public ownership with the current cooperative management that is occurring at the area.